Art beyond Conflict
Social Exchange and
Reconciliation Directives

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IDENTITY AND EQUITY

Contemporary Australia and notions of multiculturalism and diversity at times are hindered by concepts of dualities such as ‘majority, minority or white and black’. Complex issues of identity marginalization experienced by Indigenous Australians are often reduced to what has become known as Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The limitation of two distinct terminologies risks perpetuating a counterproductive duality evident in contemporary Australia. For many people heritage informs a sense of self and place in society, and in Australia this is apparent through notions of the frontier, the arrival of British invaders and their history of ideas. However, as is well-known, settler societies wreaked havoc for traditional owners and had a rich and persuasive mythology that included deeply ingrained views of racial marginalization.

While Australian reconciliation directives are becoming more common, ideas of inclusiveness and equity often go hand in hand with matters of nationalism and appropriation, which slow the advancement of identity politics. Discussing the recurrence of identity in postcolonial race theory, Stuart Hall stated: ‘The seemingly irreducible concept of identity is related to the set of problems that it has emerged from, its centrality to the question of agency and politics.’

With regard to Australia, Marcia Langton asserted, ‘the challenge is to produce a new body of creative knowledge from Indigenous perspectives, Western traditions and from history’. Artists are taking on this challenge, making art about the world in which they live, everyday life, through the processes of exchange between people and places, and through the ‘consequent changes of meaning inherent within such transactions’. Art has the ability to provide us with new possibilities for thinking about identity and continuity as changing concepts in consideration of historical events, retaining cultural/spiritual traditions while engaging with the diversification of contemporary society.

MUSEUMS AND EXCHANGE

From the most intimate process of viewing museum collections to the public display of art, artists are responding to their histories as a way of becoming reconciled with the past. The contributors to this discussion explicitly advance processes of reconciliation via collaborative approaches with museums and their curators. Such collaboration serves as a catalyst to foreground art as a form of exchange in contemporary Australian society. The artists and works discussed in this article challenge the limitations of how museum collections may ‘reduce Aboriginal culture to a moment frozen in pre-contact time’.

I often work collaboratively and, having an arts background, I approached several colleagues who regularly work with their heritage housed in museums about taking part in this article. The following discussion includes cultural heritage worker Lyndon Ormond-Parker and mixed media artists Christian Thompson, Brook Andrew, Maree Clarke, Brian McKinnon, Julie Gough and Desmond Raymond.
Since 2002 I have conducted research either independently or with artists who are the traditional owners of material culture housed in selected British museums. During my research visits I read historical documentation predominantly concerned with regions in the Northern Territory, and accessed related objects of material culture and photographic records. The institutions and respective curators who assisted include the Department of Palaeontology at the Natural History Museum (NHM), the British Museum Library, the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas and the Reserve Collection stores at the British Museum (BM), and the Pitt Rivers Museum of Anthropology and World Archaeology (PRM), University of Oxford Collections. During 2006 I went with Desmond Raymond to visit British museums that house particular items of Raymond’s heritage. Describing this experience he spoke of how

It froze a particular time for me that I was able to go back to and connect with: I felt emotional and moved by seeing part of my cultural heritage. I wanted to touch the items, to reconnect with them, likened to how somebody would feel when reunited with a family member. Although these are seen as material objects, they are central to my identity and heritage and are symbolic of the policies held at the time, which disrupted Aboriginal existence, although we are still here today.6

Desmond Raymond is from Darwin in the Northern Territory and of Larrakia heritage. Larrakia is the name of the traditional owners, language, land and waters of the Darwin region. Museums around the world are facing challenges to move beyond the disenfranchisement of Indigenous people, and this resonated in Raymond’s words. Matters of cultural heritage preservation, access and reclamation have brought to the fore the importance of museum negotiation with the traditional owners of collections in their respective countries of heritage.

The immediacy of the need to advance communication between inheritors of material culture with museums and curators drove the agenda for the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) public debate of February 2007, ‘Memory and Universality: New Challenges Facing Museums’. Publicity for the event stated that:

This desire to play a role in the management and preservation of cultural heritage is also valid for certain cultural communities within States, such as indigenous groups. Such requests suggest that new forms of mutually beneficial collaboration should be studied and established between museums, governments and heritage professionals.7

UNESCO’s public statement emphasizes the importance of collaboration. Collaborative incentives provide a strong platform for consultation and negotiation that may also facilitate matters relating to repatriation, actual or virtual. In the case of art exchange, repatriation occurs in the most abstract sense. For example, art projects with museums result in artworks that have been informed by personal histories, heritage, ethnographic archival research and traditional knowledge exchange. Therefore when the traditional owner, the original inhabitants of a country, the maker of the art, redresses history in their work and in its exhibition, a reinterpretation of embodied and determined knowledge is imparted to the general public. Repatriation resolves as ‘a negotiation between what is good for humanity and what is good for repairing crimes, or misdemeanours of the past’.8

Explicit engagement between Indigenous Australian inheritors of museum collections was perhaps made evident when the Natural History Museum advertised a fellowship for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander to work and study at the Museum for a period of six months. The fellowship was situated in the Museum’s Human Remains Unit (HRU). The HRU conducts work associated with ‘requests for return of human remains to their community of origin’.

In Australia, the increase of such incentives is apparent across a variety of current initiatives, including community-driven projects. For example, the eMob project is an innovative online web resource providing information regarding Indigenous Australian cultural heritage housed overseas. The project has two priorities: first, to provide Indigenous Australian nations with a method of locating cultural heritage housed overseas; second, to facilitate and promote direct communication
between communities and curators. EMob was developed from the Willandra Lakes World Heritage Area Elder’s Council. Lyndon Ormond-Parker, eMob project worker, commented:

While many museums around the world have collections of Australian Indigenous material, many Aboriginal people have grown up with little or no knowledge of these collections. The desires of Aboriginal communities wishing to locate their cultural heritage housed in overseas institutions is being matched by the desire by overseas museums to establish direct contact with communities whose objects they curate, including museums, art galleries, universities and other research institutions.

Nicholas Serota, Director of Tate London, discussed how European artists have worked in the museum context since Surrealism in the early 1920s when he delivered the 1996 Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture. Serota speaks of how Surrealist artists ‘exposed and challenged some of the prevailing conditions by bringing together contemporary work with objects from earlier cultures’. Drawing our attention to the prevalence of European artists during the late 1960s Serota notes what Marcel Broodthaers called ‘the fiction of the museum’. Broodthaers proposed the ‘fiction of the museum as both a homage to and the parody of the traditional museum’. After giving a historical overview of artistic engagement with museums Serota considers site-specific artworks in the museum itself. He discusses the works of Richard Serra from the 1970s to 1992 as an example of how the ‘gallery or museum has become a studio, prompting a significant change in the conventional relationship between the artist, the work of art and the curator’. Such relationships are now made evident in the growing amount of art by artists who are the inheritors of museum collections, swinging our attention towards humanity and international relations.

**THE ARTISTS:**

**CHRISTIAN THOMPSON**

The subtle nuances of Christian Thompson’s photography and performance works engage with the diversity of social, cultural and historical contexts. They also highlight the plurality of empowered identity in an international arts context. A doctoral candidate at the Ruskin School of Art and Drawing, Oxford University, Thompson is of Bidjara heritage (from Central Western Queensland). While in Oxford Thompson conducts research at the Pitt Rivers Museum, sourcing aspects of his heritage in the most private manner, which may not be directly depicted in his images.

I tend to just immerse myself in the images, objects and texts, such as the project I am doing at the Pitt Rivers Museum in the UK; I never frame the projects with a particular agenda and with no particular reference to any specific history et cetera. Obviously global themes permeate my work and because of this I am always in search of new ways to articulate my existence as an itinerant person in a state of diasporas. I think my new works *Gamu Mambu (Blood Song)*, *HEAT*, and older works *Desert Slippers* and *The Sixth Mile* reflect this kind of universality.

![Christian Thompson, Gamu Mambu (Blood Song), 2010, 2 minutes, video screen shot, dimensions variable, image courtesy the artist](image-url)
At times art may isolate or distinguish one idea, belief, or event from another. However, in the case of Thompson’s photography it is more likely to serve as a catalyst of multi-contextual significance. Here, art serves to both intervene and recontextualize arrangements of knowledge, power and desire: He describes his practice in this way:

I make work in a completely visceral way, responding often to elements such as colour, form, display, to produce new work that fits with my own development as an artist and person inside the window of time that I am working with the collection. It is therefore impossible to propose work as I have no idea what will happen and this I think is where the magic of working with these objects lies. Ultimately I am an artist living in the world and I frame my experience through my own unique cultural perspective that belongs to me and no one else. 14

Notions of absence, presence, private and public resonate in Thompson’s works. As Stuart Hall noted, the marking of something evokes what is not said, images circulate meanings and interpretations within the language of existing frameworks of knowing.15

BROOK ANDREW

Brook Andrew is renowned for his provocative and ambitious art projects with museums. In one project Andrew transformed an entire European museum, the AAMU (Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal Art) in Utrecht; the result has been described as ‘a remarkable and at times uncomfortable theme park, a spectacle of objects, sounds and images, rich with irony and humour’.16 Responding to the diversification of Andrew’s art practice in response to museum collections, Nicholas Thomas, Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, described his work as ‘unified conceptually by interests in language, politics and longstanding contentions around Australian history’.17

Andrew delves into such unified interests of connection and contention via the receptiveness of his art, as demonstrated in Clown I and Clown II. The striking ‘zig-zag and diamond shapes’ covering the inflatable pieces are motifs from Andrew’s matriarchal Wiradjuri lineage from New South Wales. Andrew’s capacity to engage with the museum as a gallery extends artistic activities, as discussed by Nicholas Serota, by specifically advancing relations with the traditional inheritors of collections, privileging art as a form of social exchange. Homi Bhabha is well-known for foregrounding the idea that ‘artists negotiate systems of social exchange through material production’.18 For Andrew, the nuances of personal lineage and historical and contemporary ideologies are subtly transformed through the power of his art, as material production, into the realm of contemporary visual culture.
The extension of the idea of artistic production into social engagement in recent decades was labelled ‘relational aesthetics’ by Nicolas Bourriaud, who advocated that art practices ‘take their theoretical and practical point of departure from human relations and their social context’. For Bourriaud relational implies interconnecting factors that comprise the lived experience, and the aesthetics of art make visible the social context in which works are made. It is not my intention to apply a particular model of aesthetics, but rather to consider how the visual components of art resulting from social exchange both reveal and interconnect context and meaning.

MAREE CLARKE

Concepts of empowered identity are demonstrated in the images by Maree Clarke reproduced here, emphasizing the re-examination of history in the celebration of contemporary indigeneity. Clarke considers her work as a way of ‘[regenerating] cultural practices through my art and passing it on to the next generation’. Clarke is a leading South-Eastern artist and former Senior Curator of the Koorie Heritage Trust in Melbourne. She is of Mutti Mutti, Wamba Wamba and Yorta Yorta heritage. Her artworks celebrate contemporary Aboriginality, shaped through historical culture, practice and international research, including select collections from the Pitt Rivers Museum. Clarke’s work resolves in powerful interpretive artworks and collaborative projects that serve as a form of rejuvenation of historical cultural practice and therefore contribute to concepts of continuity in contemporary society. Clarke uses a range of materials in her artworks, such as kangaroo teeth, sinew, bone, emu feathers, echidna, possum skin, ochre and digital photography. ‘She produces work that has a profound and inspiring impact on south-eastern Aboriginal notions of culture and continuity’, writes Bryan Andy. Clarke is a highly regarded artist whose practice is often premised on site specificity, high levels of participation, reaching across the contemporary arts arena and contributing to community educational incentives. In the image Kopi Aboriginal Women in Mourning we see women’s faces painted white:

White ochre is rubbed through their hair and long black dresses are worn. Kopi mourning caps were worn by Aboriginal women following the death of a male. The period of time women would wear the caps depended on the type of relationship in the tribe to the male, this would vary from two weeks to six months. The white ochre represents traditional mourning practice and the black dress symbolises mourning practices today. This image depicts thirteen women it is a section of a larger work depicting thirty-eight women, representing thirty-eight language groups of Victoria.

Kopi Aboriginal Women in Mourning signifies Indigenous Australian loss of family land, language and cultural practices, at the same time as it reasserts Indigenous continuity and self-determination. Clarke’s art exemplifies the concept of cultural continuity. The idea of continuity acknowledges the survival and adaptation of disenfranchised people which was central to the work and achievements of the late Professor Peter Ucko (1938–2007). Ucko suggests that the idea of ‘interpretation’ is informed through transference of history and the politics of land.

In July 2006 I was fortunate to meet with Professor Ucko at the Institute of Archaeology, University of London, to discuss his ideas. I was particularly interested in the way he had addressed the idea of continuity in the opening speech at the One World Archaeology Conference in 1986:

How can static material objects be equated with dynamic human cultures? How can we define and recognise the ‘styles’ of human activity, as well as their possible implications? In some contexts these questions assume immense importance. Archaeological evidence of cultural continuity, as opposed to discontinuity, can make all the difference in regards to an Indigenous land claim, the right of access to a site/region.
Ucko suggested that when a site, region and cultural system have been disrupted, respective beliefs, languages and systems are transformed into something else. He considered that the condition of history, change and circumstances link together a continuity of shifting values and perspectives:

The challenge is to recognise continuity amidst change. For example, how a motif may change, but meaning will stay the same or vice versa. This requires an understanding about how interpretation is informed through the politics of land.  

**BRIAN MCKINNON**

Brian McKinnon, painter and curator of Indigenous education at the National Gallery of Victoria, is of Yamatji descent, from Western Australia. McKinnon explains his art as ‘an international language that allows everyone to take part in the discussion’.  

In McKinnon’s painting *Mungo Man*, a powerful rendition of heritage and topical scientific debates draws our attention to continuity, resistance and survival. McKinnon’s painting was inspired by the unearthing of a skeleton named Mungo Man and the subsequent scientific conflict regarding the DNA findings from the fossil, estimated to be approximately 60,000 years old.  

Mungo Man was unearthed in the region of Lake Mungo, South-Eastern New South Wales, in 1974. An Australian National University (ANU) graduate, Greg Adcock, was responsible for processing DNA from the fossil, in a project led by Alan Thorne. The findings appeared to prove that Mungo Man’s DNA was now extinct, which led some to contest the authenticity of the widely accepted Out of Africa model, according to which ‘all modern humans are descended from a group of fully modern people who evolved from Homo erectus in Africa, around 100,000 to 150,000 years ago’.  

As McKinnon claims

Mungo Man is a huge spanner in the works for the Out-of-Africa theory because it can’t explain how Mungo Man looked like modern humans, yet was not related to any human that had left Africa in the last 150,000 years. In 1974, the discovery of Mungo Man turned the conventional theory of human evolution upside-down. Mungo Man was a hominid who is estimated to have died 62,000 years ago, and was ritually buried with his hands covering his penis. In my painting *Mungo Man* I am proposing that what is now called Australia is the cradle of creation and the migration went the other way ‘Out Of Aus’ if you like. I thought the words from a song by rap artist Brother Ali says a lot about Mungo
Man and the way I have placed him in the painting, as a reversal of how I see his treatment; he is now the examiner. ‘One behind the next in line, let me check your design, your pedigree don’t hold up next mine, I’m a thoroughbred of the most excellent kind’. 27

McKinnon boldly brings together core scientific inquiry into the origins of humankind with the particularities of Indigenous Australian heritage. McKinnon spoke of Indigenous activism and resistance art:

The numbers of Aboriginal resistance artists is growing at a rate not seen in the past and is now being supported by all genres of the Arts. This phenomenon is giving Aboriginal people the confidence to voice their opinions on policies and politics on a world stage, and in doing so gives them a strong sense of pride and identity. 28

Recognition of ownership, respective to traditional landowners of reclaimed regions, was pivotal to the work of Peter Ucko. During the World Archaeological Congress Ucko was responsible for bringing together international archaeologists committed to the explicit recognition of the historical and social role, and the political context of archaeological enquiry. Ucko was a ‘passionate anti-racist’ and deeply disturbed at the way, as he saw it, Western elites had appropriated the archaeological heritage of poorer, less influential cultures as representing the inheritance of all humankind, ‘often to the detriment of those to whom it really belonged’. 29
Currently the desire to move beyond the contentions of Australian history is demonstrated in interactive models of artistic negotiation with institutional incentives, museums and curators. In McKinnon’s art we witness a transformation of the history of ideas through the language of contemporary arts. He says:

Contemporary art can address any area that concerns the artist but I think it needs a hook; this hook is the tool I use to bring the viewer closer, encouraging them to start a conversation about the content. In my case I engage in the debate on political policies that affect my family and community, where I was born and where I choose to live. Repetitively bringing these ideas to the gallery walls empowers the works, encouraging the audience to peel back the layers of meaning inherent within them, often provoking heated discussion. 30

Embracing contention, systemic in Australian history, to advance matters of equity in contemporary society is one way people may define a sense of self and community. As one participant in an edition of the ABC Radio programme *Awaye* put it: ‘Well, where do we begin with history? I guess the reality as Australians, whether we’re black, white or brindle, is that we do need to look at the past, warts and all, to understand how we got here.’31 Working together to redress history may not lead to resolution, but to disengage carries the risk of aggravating a state of irresolution and minimizing progressive action.

**JULIE GOUGH**

Artist, historian and researcher Julie Gough in her practice combines history with continuity and assertions of identity, offering us ways to understand the present. Her practice directly sources the impact of historical events, and in particular their consequences for her heritage, as a way to re-present historical stories in a contemporary setting. She explains her work as:

Part of an ongoing project that questions and re-evaluates the impact of the past on our present lives; my work is concerned with developing a visual language to express and engage with conflicting and subsumed histories and unresolved tensions. 32

*Disturbed Site* (2001) demonstrates the ramification of historical events as they intersect with the continuity of cultural heritage. It was influenced by Gough’s work at the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service in 2000 and 2001. This painting presents an enlargement of an Aboriginal Site Index Card that the Heritage section of the Parks and Wildlife Department uses to record each reported Aboriginal site. The categories on this card that require completion reflect inherent failures in the Tasmanian Government system to recognize that Aboriginal culture is ongoing and did not end in 1876 with the death of the Tasmanian Aborigine Truganini. Gough points out that the 1976 Aboriginal Relics Act recognizes Aboriginal sites as anything created or occupied by an Aboriginal person up to but not beyond 1876. 34

Julie Gough, *Disturbed Site*, 2001, gesso and acrylic medium on composition board, dimensions variable, collection of the artist
One hundred and twenty-five years later, recognition of Indigenous existence persists and is affirmed through groups and individuals; in this case, the art of Julie Gough. We can witness art as a method of activating such discussions and providing an opportunity for the contentious issues of history to be presented and examined in a public space, the museum and the gallery. The exhibition of artworks reveals living stories of identity and continuity as a way to ‘reflect Indigenous narratives of memory, time, absence, location and representation’.35

ART, EXCHANGE AND RECONCILIATION

All the artworks presented in this article are far more than an isolated activity of creating, perceiving and responding. The private immersive viewing of collections experienced by Christian Thompson results in photographic works emphasizing the plurality of empowered identity, while the provocative artworks of Brook Andrew transform the idea of a museum space into that of a gallery. Maree Clarke’s work responds to museum collections to redress an imposed discontinuity with the reality of continuity; her images enrich understanding of black iconography in popular culture, in the advancement of ideas about race, identity and empowerment. While Brian McKinnon’s paintings deal with heritage, resistance and survival combined with scientific contention, and Julie Gough’s work directly sources particular historical events as a way to exhibit living stories of identity and continuity.

The artworks presented are examples of versatile and innovative exchange. They draw our attention to society as a networked and constantly changing process, and offer new possibilities of negotiation. From the most dispassionate, disconnected viewer to the most informed viewer, museums and galleries, as public spaces, continue to provide the public with the opportunity to learn more.

One way to learn more of the dynamics of contemporary society is to look at the way they are resolved into artworks such as those discussed in this paper. Interpretive artworks are not a ‘copy’ of a deeper societal structure, nor are they a formal grammar of visual signs to do with one culture or another. Art is transformative, it is made new by encapsulating different sites of knowledge. Works presented here transcend the detrimental entrapment of identity marginalization that often hinders national discourse with a vision that proposes positive engagement with popular culture and empowerment.

The artworks presented by Christian Thompson, Brook Andrew, Maree Clarke, Brian McKinnon and Julie Gough demonstrate that it is possible to move beyond histories steeped in conflict and contention towards new practical reconciliation initiatives between individuals, institutions, museums and curators.

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6 D K Raymond, in conversation with the author, Darwin, 4 August 2006 AUTHOR: CAN YOU
8 Robert Kruszynski, personal communication with the author, 29 July 2006
11 Marcel Broodthaers, quoted in Nicholas Serota, Experience or Interpretation: The Dilemma of Museums of Modern Art, Thames and Hudson, London, 2000, p 38
12 Serota, op cit, p 36
13 Christian Thompson, personal communication with the author, June 2011
14 Ibid
15 Stuart Hall, Representation and the Media, Media Education Foundation, Northampton, 1997
19 Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics, Presses du réel, Paris, 2002, p 113
20 Maree Clarke, personal communication with the author, February 2011
22 Clarke, personal communication, February 2011
24 Peter Ucko, personal communication with the author, 13 July 2006
25 Brian McKinnon, personal communication with the author, June 2011
27 McKinnon, personal communication, June 2011
28 Ibid
29 The Telegraph newspaper, obituary for Professor Peter Ucko, updated 25 June 2007, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1555534/Professor-Peter-Ucko.html
30 McKinnon, personal communication, June 2011
31 ‘Respect yourself: Historical Amnesia, Cultural Ownership and Respect’, Blakatak Program of Thought event 3, featured on the Awaye programme, ABC Radio National, Sydney, 2005
33 Julie Gough, Disturbed Site ©, at http://juliegough.wordpress.com/
34 Julie Gough, artist website, op cit

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